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ABSTRACT

Father absence is a growing phenomenon in urban areas. Although both black and white children from low income families are affected, the great rise in father absence rates has been in black families. Three studies of the effect of father absence upon the acaderic achievement of urban elementary school children are presented in this paper. In the first study, 1073 reading and math scores of fourth grade black children in a midwestern metropolitan school system were analyzed. It was found that youngsters from father present homes scored significantly higher than those from father absent homes. In the second study, children in remedial reading and math programs from twenty Title I schools in a single district were analyzed. Children from father absent homes were found to be over represented (in proportion to their presence in the general school population) in both remedial programs. In the third study, first grade reading scores from three schools in an urban/ rural program were compared. Statistically, differences were found favoring the children from father present homes. The notion that father absence does have a definite effect upon some children's academic achievement is supported by the results of these studies. Some implications for future educational practice are suggested. (Author/GC)

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FATHER ABSENCE: AN OVERLOOKED FACTOR IN THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF URBAN DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Father absence is a growing phenomenon on the urban scene. Although both black and white children from low income families are affected, the great rise in father absence rates has been in black families. In 1950, father absence rates for whites was 8.5%; for blacks, it was 17.6%. By 1975, the father absence rate for whites had increased slightly to 10.5%, but for blacks, it had doubled to 35.3%.[1]

Three studies made by the author of the effect of father absence upon the academic achievement of urban elementary school children are presented in this paper.

Studies of the past fail to arrive at consistent conclusions regarding the effects of father absence on children's achievement. A study by Deutsch[2] found lower achievement for black children from father absent homes, but did not relate this to the broken home factor. Coleman and others[3] found father absence insignificantly related to achievement, except for youngsters from Puerto Rican, Chinese, or Mexican subgroups. A second analysis of the Coleman data by Tabler and others[4] concluded that children from father absent homes scored lower, but that father

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absence was insignificant when compared with race differences. Peterson and others[5] studied 600 boys from low income families and found a positive association between intact family and achievement, particularly for black boys. Wilson[6] found results so mixed that they defied interpretation. Mackie and others[7] found better performance among children from father present homes.

No differences in academic performance of father absence or father present children were found by Mackler[8] or Wasserman[9] in their separate studies. Herzog and Sudia[10] concluded that it is unlikely that father absence in itself is related to poorer achievement.

In the first study[11], the author analyzed 1073 reading and math scores of fourth grade black children in Model Cities school program in a large midwestern metropolitan school system. Scores were from eight different schools over a two-year period. With 773 children from father present homes and 300 children from father absent homes, achievement in both reading and math, youngsters from father present homes scored significantly higher than those from father absent homes. Greatest differences are noted among children in the >100 I.Q. range. These differences are approximately one year, in terms of grade equivalent scores. Tables 1 and 2 show these differences.

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Put Tables 1 and 2 here.
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Study number two by the author[12] was an analysis of children in remedial reading and remedial math programs from 20 Title I schools in a single midwestern metropolitan school district. The father absence rate for black children in this school system was estimated at 30 percent. Children from father absent homes were over represented in both remedial programs. Ranging from a low of 48.38% in the 5th

grade to a high of 70.14% in the 3rd grade, their overall percentage is 58.17%, nearly double the expectancy in the remedial reading program. In the remedial math program, the number of children from father absent homes ranges from a low of 49.29% in the 5th grade to a high of 64.51% in the 4th grade with an overall average of 56.75%. These differences can be seen in Tables 3 and 4.

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The over representation of black children from father absent homes in Title I remedial programs would tend to support the notion that father absence does have a definite effect upon some children's academic achievement.

In the third study (1977, unpublished), first grade reading scores from three schools in an Urban/Rural Program were compared. Both blacks and whites were included so that the scores of children from 158 father present families were compared with 108 from father absent families. Utilizing the results of the Gates-McGinitie Reading Test, statistically significant differences were found favoring the children from father present homes. In the vocabulary subtest, mean score was 43.72 for father present children and 34.37 for father absent ($p < .003$). For father present children, the mean score in comprehension was 41.41 with 35.88 for children from father absent homes ($p < .011$). This can be seen in Table 5.

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Some educators may adopt a "so what" attitude, citing the fact that schools cannot change the condition of father absence in the homes

of children. Yet, can schools profess to be moving in the direction of "equality of educational opportunity" and fail to study or ignore this rapidly growing condition among low income black families? Father presence would seem to foster greater cohesiveness of family, a greater variety of family activities, a greater quantity of adult-child verbal interaction, and a greater experiential variety than would father absence. These characteristics of family life are activities which are directly related to academic achievement of children and are of the type commonly found in the present approaches of those who seek to increase the parent role in the educational process of children.

If further studies demonstrate the negative influence of father absence upon the academic achievement of black youngsters, then certainly compensatory education programs will be morally obliged to attempt measures which overcome this home condition. A recently published study by Henry[13] in which boys who were read to by their fathers for the six month period immediately preceding entrance into first grade scored significantly higher on predictor instruments for first grade reading achievement than boys read to by their mothers, or boys in an unplanned situation for the same period. When one considers the preponderance of instructional and supportive services in compensatory educational programs which are conducted by females, then the possibility of the need for male influence as a catalyst for accelerated growth in academic achievement, for some children, looms as a potential consideration.

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TABLE 1

Mean Reading Scores and F-Ratios for Fourth Grade Students by year, Sex, Intelligence, and Family Status, and the Interaction of These Variables with the Family Status Factor

Variable	N	Mean Reading Score	df	F-Ratio	P Less Than
School Year					
1971	480	2.95	1	1.1160	0.2906
1972	593	3.02			
Sex					
Female	527	3.14	1	25.0322	0.0001*
Male	546	2.81			
Intelligence					
<84	626	2.61		2162.1883	0.0001*
84-100	387	3.33			
>100	60	4.75			
Family Status					
Father absent	300	2.80	1	17.1503	0.0001*
Father present	773	3.05			
School year and Family Status					
'71-Father absent	166	2.79	1	0.0829	0.7734
'72-Father absent	134	2.81			
'71-Father present	314	3.04			
'72-Father present	459	3.08			
Sex and Family Status					
Female-Father absent	159	2.88	1	2.5170	0.1128
Female-Father present	368	3.26			
Male-Father absent	141	2.70			
Male-Father present	405	2.89			
Intelligence and Family Status					
<84-Father absent	192	2.53	2	4.1410	0.0162**
<84-Father present	434	2.64			
84-100-Father absent	94	3.14			
84-100-Father present	293	3.39			
>100-Father absent	14	4.09			
>100-Father present	46	4.95			

*Significant at the .01 Level
**Significant at the .05 Level

TABLE 2

Mean Arithmetic Scores and F-Ratios for Fourth Grade Students by Year, Sex, Intelligence and Family Status, with the Interaction of These Variables with the Family Status Factor

Variable	N	Mean Reading Score	df	F-Ratio	P Less Than
School Year					
1971	480	3.30	1	1.1160	0.1322
1972	593	3.21			
Sex					
Female	527	3.35	1	3.5894	0.0585
Male	546	3.19			
Intelligence					
<84	626	2.88	2	97.2959	0.0001*
84-100	387	3.56			
>100	60	4.78			
Family Status					
Father Absent	300	3.07	1	12.6860	0.0004*
Father Present	773	3.33			
School Year and Family Status					
'71-Father absent	166	3.13	1	0.1258	0.7229
'72-Father absent	134	3.00			
'71-Father present	314	3.42			
'72-Father present	459	3.27			
Sex and Family Status					
Female-Father absent	159	3.04	1	4.4467	0.0353**
Female-Father present	368	3.45			
Male-Father absent	141	3.11			
Male-Father present	405	3.22			
Intelligence and Family Status					
<84-Father absent	192	2.80	2	4.8625	0.0080*
<84-Father present	434	2.91			
84-100-Father absent	94	3.50			
84-100-Father present	293	3.58			
>100-Father absent	14	3.97			
>100-Father present	46	5.02			

*Significant at the .01 Level
**Significant at the .05 Level

TABLE 3

A BREAKDOWN OF THE FAMILY STATUS
OF BLACK CHILDREN IN THE TITLE I REMEDIAL
READING PROGRAM 1974-1975

Grade Level	No. of Children From Father Absent Homes	Percent	No. of Children From Father Present Homes	Percent	Total
2	13	54.16	11	45.83	24
3	47	70.14	20	29.85	67
4	40	54.79	33	45.20	73
5	45	48.38	48	51.61	93
6	26	63.41	15	36.58	41
	MEAN	58.17		41.81	

TABLE 4

A BREAKDOWN OF THE FAMILY STATUS
OF BLACK CHILDREN IN THE TITLE I
REMEDIAL MATH PROGRAM 1974-1975

GRADE LEVEL	No. of Children From Father Absent Homes	Percent	No. of Children From Father Present Homes	Percent	Total
4	60	64.51	33	35.48	93
5	35	49.29	36	50.70	71
6	35	56.45	27	43.54	62
	AVERAGE	56.75		43.24	

TABLE 5

FATHER ABSENCE AND FIRST GRADE
READING SCORES (GATES-MCGINITIE)

SUBTEST	N	FAMILY STATUS	MEAN	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE
VOCABULARY	158	Intact Family	43.72	<.003
	108	Broken Family	34.37	
COMPREHENSION	158	Intact Family	41.41	<.011
	108	Broken Family	35.88	

SOURCE: Three Urban/Rural Program Schools, 1977.